



## **Office of the Mayor**

### **NEWS RELEASE**

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### **Government academy builds informed citizenry**

*Contact: Mikki Dobski, Director of Communications & Special Projects, 235-5855 or 876-1564, or Ann-Carol Nash, Assistant City Attorney, 235-5867*

They've seen a firefighter get into gear and police dogs find contraband. They've walked backstage at the Morris Performing Arts Center and toured sites of South Bend's economic revitalization. They've participated in a mock Common Council meeting and an actual State of the City address.

And come this Thursday, about two dozen participants will see the inside of a fire hydrant, review the new LED traffic signals and watch state-of-the-art street sweepers in the final session of South Bend's 10-week Local Government Academy.

A commencement ceremony will be part of the two-hour session, which begins at 5:30 p.m. at the Public Works Service Center, 731 S. Lafayette Blvd.

Participants in the academy don't just get a behind-the-scenes look at city facilities. They acquire an insider's understanding of the way city government operates. Class members can speak knowledgeably about the impact of the 2 percent property-tax Circuit Breaker or tell the difference between neighborhood, community and special parks.

"With all of the dirty politics that makes the national news and the local Roseland circus, it is important to understand government better," said South Bend resident Martin Bean, IT manager at Heraeus Kulzer Inc. "I will set higher goals for myself because of the academy, be involved, and pass on the pride the leaders have for the city."

Since 2004, the City of South Bend has conducted six 10-week sessions of the academy to inform nearly 150 residents about the workings of their municipal government. "For government to work well in the system we have in this country, people need to understand what government does," said City Attorney Chuck Leone, who helped pattern the initial sessions after similar training programs in other cities. "It helps to have an



educated citizenry.”

Ann-Carol Nash, assistant city attorney with South Bend’s legal staff, has overseen the academy since its founding in fall 2004. Since then, six academy semesters have averaged about 25 participants per segment. More than anything, the academy has addressed the difference between public perceptions about city government and the reality.

“The academy enables our employees to explain what they do, how they do it and what they like about it,” Nash said. “From the reaction of the class members, I can tell that negative assumptions about local government are eroding. ... The academy graduates are very valuable resources for our community.”

The 10 sessions allow for a quick overview of city services. Participants’ favorite themes are as varied as the topics themselves – Ireland Road redevelopment, the 911 dispatch center, LaSalle Park improvements, plans for the Eddy Street development, seeing the Palais Royale.

“I just figured there was a lot more going on in this city than I was probably aware of – and, boy, was I right,” a participant said. “This has been the most interesting and informative activity in which I have been involved in many years,” said another.

Half of the sessions take place in the County-City Building with the remainder dispersed among various city facilities. Over the past four years, participants have indicated that each session seems to vie for their attention as the most fascinating.

“I was shown at every class that the people who work for the city truly care about South Bend,” said South Bend resident Marybeth Saunders.

“They presented world-class goals,” Bean said, “not resting on mediocrity.”

The presentations reinforce an understanding of South Bend as a community with many positive things going for it. “I was not aware how progressive and advanced South Bend is,” a participant said.

Mary Ann Merryman, chair of the department of business administration and economics at Saint Mary’s College, was so impressed in her own participation in the academy in fall 2005 that she required students in her Accounting for Not-for-Profit Organizations course to attend a minimum number of sessions. The students are able to take the theory they learn in class and see how it applies in practice in South Bend.

“The students get a lot out of it,” Merryman said. “These students are going to be citizens of some town. They’re going to need to pay property taxes and vote for city officials. They really should have a better understanding of how municipal government operates.”

“I think about local government differently now,” said Katie Marr, a Saint Mary’s student from Detroit. “Maybe I’ll groan about paying property taxes, but at least I understand them. ... I think the efforts to improve the local economy and the neighborhoods are exciting.”



Civic connections make people healthy, wealthy and wise, according to sociologist Robert D. Putnam in the 2000 study *Bowling Alone*.

“I’m frankly sick of hearing people gripe about what is or isn’t going on in South Bend and who appear committed to being part of the problem rather than the solution,” Saunders said. “Being empowered to be involved is essential to the health and well-being of South Bend.”

Saunders points to City Plan, South Bend’s 20-year strategic plan, as “the vehicle that will regain a sense of pride, unity and ownership of our city.”

“A tremendous show of excitement and participation was displayed in every neighborhood,” she said. “That kind of energy and positive action must be kept alive in order for South Bend to flourish.”

South Bend’s Local Government Academy provides another outlet for people to prepare themselves for more vigorous participation in the democracy.

“For many years, I have felt unattached and out of the loop,” said Robert Holmer before attending the sessions. “I think everyone should take this course. ... I have an idea of what department to turn to if a question should arise.”

*The next 10-week session of South Bend’s Local Government Academy will begin in August. For more information, visit the city’s web site, [www.SouthBendIN.gov](http://www.SouthBendIN.gov), at that time, or call (574) 235-5859.*